

FRESH CUP

A group of men are working on a hillside, digging and clearing land. They are wearing various hats and clothing, including a white cowboy hat, a blue shirt, a red shirt, a striped shirt, a yellow shirt, and a white shirt. They are using tools like shovels and axes. The background is a lush green hillside with trees and vegetation.

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**SAVING MONEY ON
CUPS AND SLEEVES** p.32

**MAKING THE MOST OF
MORNING DOWNTIME** p.36

MARKETING HIGH-END TEAS p.46

HONDURAS WATER PROJECT

p.40

THE MAGAZINE FOR SPECIALTY COFFEE & TEA PROFESSIONALS SINCE 1992

FIRST REVIEW OF FAIR TRADE PILOT PROJECT IS MIXED

With the dawning of 2013, Fair Trade USA is officially one year into its Fair Trade for All initiative, which began on Jan. 1, 2012. Before we check in with a progress report, here's a quick recap on Fair Trade for All's inception:

Fair Trade USA made headlines in September 2011 when it separated from its parent organization, Fairtrade International (FLO), and announced Fair Trade for All, an initiative with the goal, as the press release at the time put it, "to double U.S. sales for fair-trade farmers and extend fair-trade benefits to millions of additional farmers and workers by 2015." The most newsworthy aspect of the new strategy was that it saw Fair Trade USA expanding from certifying just the cooperative model (where workers combine resources and share profits) to also certifying groups of independent smallholders not organized into co-ops as well as farm workers on estates. The move was met by some accusations that Fair Trade USA was turning its back on the co-op model in favor of large-scale expansion.

Fast-forward to today, where the first 12 months of the strategy have seen the implementation of four pilot projects—two concentrated on farm workers on estates in Brazil, and two targeting smallholders, one in San Ramón, Costa Rica, and the other in Nariño, Colombia. So far Fair Trade USA hasn't released any public statements on the progress of the pilots, but Miguel Zamora, who is leading the pilots as Fair Trade USA's director of coffee innovation and producer relations, says the initial results will be shared in March and April. "We will be collecting info [on the first year of the pilots] beginning in January," he says. "In March, I plan to present at Coffee Fest New York, and I hope to begin talking about initial results by then."

So far there has been only one source of updates on any of the in-progress pilots: Catholic Relief Services' Coffeelands blog, which in late November published a series of posts with observations on the Nariño pilot (which CRS helped fund) based on the findings of its team on the ground there. The Nariño pilot is working with around 500 smallholder farmers, each owning a hectare (about two and a half acres) or less. The project has organized farmers into small groups of about 20 to 30; each group has elected a representative, and those reps together form

a Fair Trade Committee, which implements fair-trade processes for each group.

Michael Sheridan, author of the Coffeelands blog, wrote there that the Nariño pilot has helped smallholder farmers get better organized to enter the market and to identify community needs that fair-trade premiums can then help fund. However, Sheridan's posts identified two major concerns about the pilot moving forward: one concerning impact assessment, and the other the concept of "market access partners," the supply chain intermediaries that Fair Trade USA is certifying to link independent smallholder farmers with fair-trade buyers.

On the assessment front, CRS wants Fair Trade USA to find a third-party organization to implement an independent monitoring-and-evaluation system to record unbiased data on Fair Trade for All's impact. "We're coming up on a year and Fair Trade USA still hasn't published a monitoring-and-evaluation framework, and that's problematic," Sheridan said in an interview. "If the next round of pilots starts before performance indicators are defined and baseline data is collected, it will be very hard to talk in any credible way about the impacts of Fair Trade for All."

On the point of "market access partners," Sheridan says that the CRS experience in Nariño has raised questions about both the ability and the willingness of coffee exporters to lead the processes of organization and empowerment of independent smallholder farmers. "These are not generally among the core competencies of traditional coffee exporters," he says. "Plus, exporters are more profitable when farmers are dependent on the services they provide. It may not be in their financial interest to invest their own resources in processes that will make those farmers commercially independent." One possible solution proposed by Sheridan: Link exporters with local nonprofits steeped in social development. "We think this approach can help address our concerns," he says.

Zamora of Fair Trade USA says he routinely talks to Sheridan and that the organization is taking CRS' comments into consideration. "I take it as constructive criticism that can help us improve," he says. "We're actually trying to include some of those comments and implement them in our work right away." Zamora adds that the other smallholder pilot—in San Ramón, Costa Rica—is progressing more quickly, as a farmer association existed there previously and so the region is familiar with the structure.



MORE COFFEE AND TEA NEWS OF NOTE FROM THE PAST MONTH:

COUNTER CULTURE'S LEM BUTLER won the Southeast Regional Barista Competition; another Counter Culture rep, Jonathan Bonchak, took home the region's Brewer's Cup title. | STARBUCKS FEATURED a geisha-variety coffee from Costa Rica at 46 locations in the Northwest. The brew cost customers \$7 a cup. |

continued on page 20

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OFF THE WIRE

Continued from page 18

He says there will be an additional six to eight pilots unveiled in the coming weeks—both with estate farm workers and smallholders—as Fair Trade USA continues to build a data set.

Zamora says Fair Trade for All's goal to double fair-trade sales and bring millions of farmers into the system by 2015 is still on track. And he adds that the most valuable information won't be available until 2014, after the organization has another year with the pilots from which to draw. "A year from now we should have all of this information that we will be able to analyze together with nonprofit organizations to understand if fair trade is really working under these standards."

—Chris Ryan

HOLIDAYS GAVE SMALL ROASTERS A REASON TO BLEND

This past Christmas season, a number of the nation's top micro-roasters handed their staffs a challenge: Craft blends on par with the single-origin selections.

The popularity of the blend in specialty coffee has been somewhat in decline of late as young, nimble, direct-sourcing roasting companies have drawn attention to themselves and farmers around the world by marketing coffees made up entirely of beans from a single plantation or co-op. But that has created a bit of a conundrum when the holidays come around and consumers gravitate toward the Yuletide-themed blends that have long been popular among coffee gift givers.

How can small roasters stay true to their single-origin souls but still capitalize on the season? The 2012 holiday rush showed that one solution is to blend coffees that have already proven they can stand on their own. Some roasters say, in fact, that throwing super-premium coffees in a blend can produce heightened flavors—and a deeper understanding of those prized beans. "Most people would say, 'Why would you waste that coffee by blending it with something else?'" says Trevor Corlett, owner of Michigan's MadCap Coffee, which last month marketed a Holiday Fusion offering that combined a micro-lot Costa Rican coffee with a quality Kenyan. "Our idea was, let's try to make something better by showing how these coffees work well together."

For many boutique roasters, that blend-it-up attitude isn't prevalent the rest of the year. At Washington's Olympia Coffee Roasters, for instance, the roasting team creates an espresso blend called Big Truck, but every other coffee on offer is a single origin. That is, until the holidays roll around. Then it's time to develop the company's Holiday Blend, which changes every year. This season the goal was to use the product to honor two of the company's longest standing direct origin relationships—one with a farmer group in Colombia, the other with a co-op in Ethiopia.

Olympia Coffee owner Oliver Stormshak says until three years ago his team aimed for classic wintertime flavors with its holiday

JAPAN-BASED FOOD COMPANY ITO EN recalled 400,000 packages of China-grown oolong tea after some samples tested high for pesticide residue. | FIVE MONTHS AFTER BUYING PEET'S COFFEE & TEA. German holding company